

LAKE SHASTA -- Caleen Sisk-Franco has seen it herself.

Houseboats cruise up to Shasta's rust-colored banks. The occupants hop out onto shore.

And they start digging.

The buried treasures they seek are American Indian artifacts that have long been lost in the depths of the state's largest reservoir.

Untold quantities of those relics are seeing the light of day once more, exposed on or near the shore as the sprawling artificial lake, which had to be partially drained last winter after heavy rains, sinks to its lowest levels in a decade.

"It's like someone digging up your grandmother and stealing her teeth," said Sisk-Franco, spiritual leader for the Winnemem band of Wintu Indians. "It's not right."

The collection of these artifacts has the Shasta-Trinity National Forest concerned. Officials recently cited some relic hunters for disturbing the remains of an ancient village.

Several other sites around the reservoir have seen similar artifact collections, though details as to where and how many were not available.

Many of the area's most sensitive archaeological spots are on the McCloud arm, a deep canyon through which the McCloud River flowed before Shasta Dam was built 60 years ago.

The Wintu lived along the McCloud, catching fish and collecting acorns. U.S. Forest Service reports mention 49 Wintu village sites on the McCloud arm, all inundated or at partially inundated after the dam went up.

Many were recorded as archaeological sites either before the dam was built or during low-water years.

What's more, nearly 60 middens -- ancient refuse heaps that often contain clusters of artifacts -- lie below the reservoir's maximum surface level. These become exposed when Lake Shasta drops, and are subject to erosion, vandalism and damage from access roads and camping.

Many of the cultural relics pinpoint Wintu habitation over the past 500 years, although bow-like atlatls, dart fragments and projectile points from a nearby cave suggest much earlier occupation.

On the southern end of the reservoir, the Klikapudi area holds a number of prehistoric campsites and has been considered for nomination as a special archaeological district. It was occupied as long as 4,000 years ago.

And to the north and west of Lake Shasta in the Sacramento River drainage, Wintu villages were located on terraces that have since been submerged. The Indians traveled higher into the watershed to gather acorns, pine nuts and other food, harvesting suckers from the creeks and salmon from the river.

"Very little" archaeology work was done in that area before the dam was built, Forest Service reports say.

Today, the dam regulates downstream flows while storing water for agricultural and municipal use across the state.

However, much of the lake's stored water had to be dumped last winter to make room for future rainfall that never came. As a result, Lake Shasta on Friday was 102 feet below the crest of the dam -- nearly 50 feet down from last year at this time, and the lowest since Jan. 8, 1995.

The lower the lake, the larger the bathtub-ring around its edge, where the disturbances have taken place.

While visitors to the forest are welcome to explore historic sites, federal law prohibits disturbing them, officials say. In most cases, it's illegal to collect "items of antiquity."

Sisk-Franco wouldn't call it "collecting." She calls it "looting."

Her people are concerned about a proposal to raise the dam, which would submerge another 20 sites farther up the McCloud River. Sisk-Franco says those sites already ceded to the lake should be left alone.

"We've already suffered," she said.

Reporter Alex Breitler can be reached at 225-8344 or at abreitler@redding.com.

Copyright 2004, Redding. All Rights Reserved.